# Binge Times

Inside Hollywood's Furious Billion-Dollar Battle to Take Down Netflix

# Dade Hayes and Dawn Chmielewski

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# Streamatis Personae

## Amazon

Jeff Bezos, founder and executive chairman, former CEO Andy Jassy, CEO Mike Hopkins, senior vice president, Prime Video and Amazon Studios Jennifer Salke, head of Amazon Studios Albert Cheng, chief operating officer, co-head of television Roy Price, former head of global video content and Amazon Studios Bob Berney, former head of marketing and distribution, Amazon Studios

# Apple

Steve Jobs, late cofounder and CEO Tim Cook, CEO Zack Van Amburg, co-head of Apple TV+ Jamie Erlicht, co-head of Apple TV+ Eddy Cue, senior vice president, internet software and services

# AT&T/WarnerMedia

Randall Stephenson, former CEO, AT&T John Stankey, CEO, AT&T; former CEO, WarnerMedia

#### STREAMATIS PERSONAE

Jason Kilar, CEO, WarnerMedia Andy Forssell, executive vice president and general manager, WarnerMedia direct-to-consumer Bob Greenblatt, former chairman, WarnerMedia Kevin Reilly, former chief content officer, HBO Max Jeremy Legg, former chief technology officer, WarnerMedia Richard Plepler, former chairman and CEO, HBO

# **Comcast/NBCUniversal**

Brian Roberts, CEO, Comcast Steve Burke, former CEO, NBCUniversal Bonnie Hammer, vice chairman, NBCUniversal Matt Strauss, chairman, direct-to-consumer and international Jeff Shell, CEO, NBCUniversal

## Netflix

Reed Hastings, cofounder, co-CEO Marc Randolph, cofounder, former CEO Ted Sarandos, co-CEO Cindy Holland, former vice president, content acquisition and original series Bela Bajaria, vice president, content Scott Stuber, vice president, original films Neil Hunt, former chief product officer Patty McCord, former head of HR

# Quibi

Jeffrey Katzenberg, founder Meg Whitman, CEO

#### STREAMATIS PERSONAE

# Roku

Anthony Wood, founder, CEO Scott Rosenberg, senior vice president, platform business

# The Walt Disney Co.

Michael Eisner, former chairman and CEO
Bob Iger, former CEO and executive chairman
Bob Chapek, CEO
Kareem Daniel, chairman, media and entertainment distribution
Tom Staggs, former chief operating officer
Kevin Mayer, former chairman, direct-to-consumer and international
Jimmy Pitaro, chairman, ESPN and sports content
John Skipper, former president, ESPN
Ricky Strauss, former president, content and marketing for Disney+
Albert Cheng, former chief product officer, digital media, Disney ABC Television Group
Anne Sweeney, former cochair, Disney Media Networks; former president, Disney ABC Television Group

# **O**Notes

Not much typically escapes from streaming's mythical "black box," the broadly applied term for the vault of analytics at the burgeoning industry's core. Fortunately, in the case of this book, two and a half years of research and reporting yielded a significant degree of insight into the marketplace and the corporations and personalities who shape streaming. Across the country, virtually and in person, in Los Angeles; New York; Silicon Valley; Washington, D.C.; Miami; Denver; and elsewhere, we conducted more than two hundred interviews with current and former executives, technologists, producers, consultants, agents, and many more. We selectively drew from our own pieces for Deadline and *Forbes*, which are cited in the enhancement along with other source material. Our goal was not to aggregate our old reports, but rather to build a stand-alone narrative. As such, we took pains to draw a clear line between our daily coverage and specific conversations and in-person opportunities intended for this book.

The major players in our drama, by and large, welcomed us in, though it was a constantly evolving and always-sensitive conversation. Disney proved to be a wholly unique situation, becoming a virtually impenetrable fortress for all journalists (and even many of its business partners) once COVID-19 hit in early 2020. With their company hanging in the balance and a new executive at the helm, Disney opted to put on a brave face and keep mum rather than discuss the myriad challenges confronting its businesses. For a time, publicists stopped responding to emails, phone calls, and texts after initially making numerous pledges to connect us with top executives. Apple also denied our repeated requests for conversations with senior management. In the cases of Apple and Disney, as well as the entire field, we gleaned information by attending company events and speaking with creative and business partners as well as a number of long-tenured former executives.

*Binge Times* draws upon the insightful work of our media peers, including Joe Flint, Ben Mullin, Edmund Lee, Brooks Barnes, Nicole Sperling, Meg James, Ryan Faughnder, Lucas Shaw, Cynthia Littleton, and Josef Adalian. Along with a field of emerging voices too numerous to mention by name, we aggressively covered a story that was developing even as we wrote. A burgeoning conversation on Twitter among a number of consultants, executives, and assorted pundits also stimulated our thoughts. A range of senior entertainment industry executives and connected insiders spoke to us on condition of anonymity so they could speak freely about behind-the-scenes events without fear of alienating their employers or business partners. We agreed to honor those requests.

#### PREFACE

Netflix chief content officer Ted Sarandos is quoted from a *Vanity Fair* New Establishment Summit interview in 2018; Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is quoted from the Code Conference in 2016; Steven Friedlander's quote is from his Facebook post.

"By the Waters of Babylon," by Steven Vincent Benét, was first published on July 31, 1937, in the *Saturday Evening Post* as "The Place of the Gods." Manny Farber's "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art" was published in *Film Culture* 27, Winter 1962–63.

#### INTRODUCTION: THE RECKONING

Jane Rosenthal and John Stankey were interviewed by the authors. Material from the *Game of Thrones, Morning Show*, and *Irishman* premieres is from the authors' firsthand account. The chapter draws from Brendan Klinkenberg, "Apple's Beats 1 Radio Is Censoring Music," BuzzFeed, June 30, 2015, and Maria Elena Fernandez, "*The Morning Show* Was a Challenge Kerry Ehrin Couldn't Resist," *New York*, November 1, 2019. Thierry Frémaux's comments were made in an interview with *Le Film Français*, as reported in Rhonda Richford, "Cannes Artistic Director Explains Netflix Competition Ban," *Hollywood Reporter*, March 23, 2018.

#### CHAPTER 1: THE DISCOVERY OF TELEVISION AMONG THE BEES

David Blair, Thomas Kessler, Mark Cuban, Rob Glaser, Jonathan Taplin, and Ira Rubenstein were interviewed by the authors. This chapter also draws from material in John Battelle, "WAX or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees," *Wired*, February 2, 1993; John Markoff, "Cult Film Is a First on Internet," *New York Times*, May 24, 1993; Kara Swisher and Evan Ramstad, "Yahoo to Announce Acquisition of Broadcast.com for \$5.7 Billion," *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 1999; "Blockbuster Acquires Movielink," Bloomberg News, August 9, 2007; and John Kisseloff's *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1929–1961* (Golden, CO: ReAnimus Press, 2013).

In addition to Kisseloff, another excellent resource that informed this chapter is historian Erik Barnouw's *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

#### NOTES

#### CHAPTER 2: HOLLYWOOD'S NEW CENTER OF GRAVITY

Marc Randolph, Patty McCord, and Joe Amodei were interviewed by the authors. Arthur Miller is quoted in Jean Stein's oral history West of Eden: An American Place (New York: Random House, 2016), which also contains details about Jack Warner's estate. The chapter relies on an article by Scott Markus, "Los Angeles Ghosts-the Spirit of Hollywood's First Sex Symbol Rudolph Valentino" on AmericanGhost Walks.com; Joe Flint, "Netflix's Reed Hastings Deems Remote Work 'a Pure Negative," Wall Street Journal, September 7, 2020; Brooks Barnes, "'The Town Hall of Hollywood.' Welcome to the Netflix Lobby," New York Times, July 14, 2019; Marc Randolph, *That Will Never Work* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019); Dawn Chmielewski, "How Reed Hastings Rewrote the Hollywood Script," Forbes, September 7, 2020; Reed Hastings and Erin Meyer, No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention (New York: Penguin Press, 2020); Stephen Armstrong, "Has TV Gone Too Far?" Times (London), January 15, 2017; Vivian Giang, "She Created Netflix's Culture and It Ultimately Got Her Fired," Fast Company, February 17, 2016; Shalini Ramachandran and Joe Flint, "At Netflix, Radical Transparency and Blunt Firings Unsettle the Ranks," Wall Street Journal, October 25, 2018; Patty McCord, Powerful: Building a Culture of Freedom and Responsibility (Silicon Guild, 2017); and Susan Adams, "The Alchemist," Forbes, May 27, 2002.

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#### **CHAPTER 3: NETFLIX LIVES UP TO ITS NAME**

Ted Sarandos, Neil Hunt, Anthony Wood, Chris Albrecht, Cindy Holland, Steve Swasey, and Roy Price were interviewed by the authors. The chapter also derives material from Randolph's *That Will Never Work*; Eliot Van Buskirk, "How the Net-flix Prize Was Won," *Wired*, September 22, 2009; Richard Barton's interview by Dawn Chmielewski for "How Netflix's Reed Hastings Rewrote the Hollywood Script"; Austin Carr, "Inside Netflix's Project Griffin: The Forgotten History of Roku Under Reed Hastings," *Fast Company*, January 23, 2013; Brian Stelter, "Net-flix to Pay Nearly \$1 Billion to Add Films to On-Demand Service," *New York Times*, August 10, 2010; Hastings's comments on Qwikster are drawn from Hastings and Meyer, *No Rules Rules*; Dorothy Pomerantz, "Did Disney Just Save Netflix?," *Forbes*, December 5, 2012; Jim Lanzone interviewed by Dawn Chmielewski for "How Netflix's Reed Hastings Rewrote the Hollywood Script"; Dawn Chmielewski, "Ted Sarandos Upends Hollywood with Netflix Revolution," *Los* 

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Accounts of the antitrust trial in Washington are based on the authors' coverage there as well as reports of the Trump administration's motivations for pursuing the lawsuit, among them Jane Mayer's "The Making of the Fox News White House," *New Yorker*, March 4, 2019. Deadline coverage by the authors includes "AT&T-Time Warner Merger Approved," June 12, 2018.

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#### CHAPTER 5: "THE STATUS QUO, WE KNEW, WAS NOT SUSTAINABLE"

Kevin Mayer, Albert Cheng, Anne Sweeney, Joe Ambeault, Denise Denson, Andy Bird, and Bob Bowman were interviewed by the authors.

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#### **CHAPTER 6: LIVE FROM CUPERTINO**

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#### CHAPTER 7: COOKING UP "QUICK BITES"

Jeffrey Katzenberg interview with Dawn Chmielewski, "Coronavirus Lockdown Will Boost Meg Whitman's and Jeff Katzenberg's New Mobile Streaming Service Quibi," Forbes, April 3, 2020; Katzenberg interview with Andrew Wallenstein, "Inside Jeffrey Katzenberg's Plan to Revolutionize Media on Mobile Screens," Variety, July 19, 2017; Dawn Chmielewski interview with Meg Whitman, "Coronavirus Lockdown Will Boost Meg Whitman's and Jeff Katzenberg's New Mobile Streaming Service Quibi"; Meg Whitman with Joan O'C. Hamilton, The Power of Many (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 22; Jason Blum interview with authors, October 16, 2020; Cody Heller interview with authors, July 8, 2020; Tegan Jones, "Dummy Is the Hilariously Filthy and Raw Show We Need Right Now," Gizmodo, April 21, 2020; Jeffrey Katzenberg interview with Bill Snyder, "Jeffrey Katzenberg: How Failure Makes a Better Leader," Stanford Business, March 13, 2018; Benjamin Mullin, "Jeffrey Katzenberg and Meg Whitman Struggle with Their Startup-and Each Other," Wall Street Journal, June 14, 2020; Jeffrey Katzenberg and Meg Whitman keynote, Consumer Electronics Show, January 8, 2020; Dawn Chmielewski interview with Zach Wechter, "Meg Whitman, Jeffrey Katzenberg Raise \$400 Million Second Funding Round as Quibi Prepares to Launch," Forbes, January 8, 2020; Van Toffler interview with the authors, March 12, 2020.

#### **CHAPTER 8: THE KID WITH THE CARTOONS**

Matt Strauss, Bonnie Hammer, and Steve Burke were interviewed by the authors. The chapter also draws upon Brian Roberts's remarks at Morgan Stanley's Technology, Media & Telecom conference in San Francisco, February 26, 2019; E. B. White, "Around the Corner," *New Yorker*, November 14, 1936; Iger, *Ride of a Lifetime*; Warren Buffett interview with Tim Arango and Bill Carter, "A Little Less

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#### CHAPTER 10: THE BIRTH OF CLOWNCO

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#### CHAPTER 11: THE FLYWHEEL

Chris Spadaccini was interviewed by the authors; Tim Wu, *The Master Switch* (New York: Random House, 2010); John Stankey remarks from the AT&T investor day on November 29, 2018, a transcript of which appears on AT&T's investor relations website, investors.att.com; and the 2018 *Vanity Fair* New Establishment Summit, October 9, 2018.

#### CHAPTER 12: TOUCHED BY TINKER BELL'S WAND

Kevin Mayer, Randy Freer, and Nick van Dyk were interviewed by the authors. Bob Iger, Ricky Strauss, Michael Paull, and Christine McCarthy remarks made at the Walt Disney Co. investor day, April 11, 2019. The chapter also draws material from Whitman and Hamilton, *Power of Many*, and Erich Schwartzel and Joe Flint, "Can Kevin Mayer Deliver the Future of Disney?," *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2019.

#### CHAPTER 13: "I LOVE THAT SHOW AND I THINK YOU WILL TOO"

Lucian Grainge, Ted Cohen, Richard Plepler, and Lee Eisenberg were interviewed by the authors; Tim Cook is quoted from Apple's September 10, 2019, product launch; Eddy Cue's remarks are from an interview with Stuart McGurk, "Can Apple Hack It in Hollywood? We Talk to the Man Behind Apple TV+," *GQ*, July 1, 2019.

#### CHAPTER 14: QUIBI VADIS?

Interviews with Jeffrey Katzenberg and Meg Whitman; Dawn Chmielewski, "Coronavirus Lockdown Will Boost Meg Whitman's and Jeff Katzenberg's New Mobile Streaming Service Quibi"; Jason Blum spoke with the authors and Grace Watkins posted remarks to Twitter. Our account also was informed by Spencer Kornhaber, "Quibi Is a Vast Wasteland," *Atlantic*, April 11, 2020; Kate Knibbs, "Laughing at Quibi Is Way More Fun Than Watching Quibi," *Wired*, July 15, 2020; Benjamin Mullin and Sahil Patel, "Quibi, Jeffrey Katzenberg's On-the-Go Streaming Bet, Adjusts to Life on the Couch," *Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 2020; Nicole Sperling, "Jeffrey Katzenberg Blames Pandemic for Quibi's Rough Start," *New York Times*, May 11, 2020.

# CHAPTER 15: "IF YOU WANT TO GRAB PEOPLE'S ATTENTION, YOU HAVE TO TEASE"

Bonnie Hammer and Matt Strauss were interviewed by the authors; Steve Burke remarks are from the January 16, 2020, NBCUniversal Peacock investor presentation.

#### **CHAPTER 16: THE IQ TEST**

Details and quotes from the WarnerMedia investor day are from the authors' firsthand account. Kevin Reilly, Bob Greenblatt, and Jeremy Legg were also interviewed by the authors. Sarah Aubrey remarks are from a panel moderated by Dade Hayes at the National Association of Broadcasters Show in Las Vegas in April 2019. Select material also came from Jeff Beer, "HBO Max Is a Branding Disaster, and This Ad Proves It," *Fast Company*, April 28, 2020.

#### CHAPTER 17: NETFLIX BETS ON ITSELF

Chris Silbermann, Cindy Holland, Andy Yeatman, and Jim Lanzone were interviewed by the authors; Reed Hastings was interviewed by Dawn Chmielewski for "How Netflix's Reed Hastings Rewrote the Hollywood Script"; Ted Sarandos's remarks are from the 2018 *Vanity Fair* New Establishment Summit.

#### **CHAPTER 18: LIFTOFF**

Kevin Mayer, Jason Cloth, Bob Greenblatt, Jeremy Legg, Kevin Reilly, and Jason Kilar were interviewed by the authors. Descriptions of the virtual *Love Life* premiere are the authors' firsthand account. Michael Paull comments about preparing for launch are from Julia Alexander, "Overload and Day One Crashing Are Things the Disney+ Team Is Thinking 'Very Much' About," Verge, August 26, 2019; James Poniewozik, "Review: Apple's 'Morning Show'? Wait for the Upgrade," *New York Times*, October 31, 2019; Troy Patterson, "'Dickinson,' from Apple TV+, Is Deeply Weird and Dazzles Gradually," *New Yorker*, October 31, 2019; Hailee Steinfeld remarks are from the Tribeca TV Festival premiere, September 14, 2019, attended by Dade Hayes; Tony Goncalves interview with Nilay Patel and Julia Alexander, "The Head of HBO Max on Launching Without Roku, Adding 4K HDR, and the Snyder Cut," Verge, June 2, 2020; John Ridley, "Op-Ed: Hey, HBO, 'Gone with the Wind' Romanticizes the Horrors of Slavery. Take It Off Your Platform for Now," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2020; Brooks Barnes, "Disney Is New to Streaming but Its Marketing Is Unmatched," *New York Times*, October 27, 2019.

#### CHAPTER 19: IN SPACE, NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU STREAM

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#### **CHAPTER 21: AMAZON ON THE MARCH**

Mike Hopkins, Jenifer Salke, and Roy Price were interviewed by the authors. The chapter also draws upon Dawn Chmielewski and David Jeans, "Why Amazon Is Paying More for MGM Than Disney Did for Star Wars and Marvel," *Forbes*, May 26, 2021; Peter Bart, "Jeff Bezos Is Taking Aim at Hollywood," Deadline, December 9, 2016; and Jeff Bezos comments in Amazon's April 29, 2021, quarterly earnings release.

#### NOTES

#### CHAPTER 22: PACIENCIA Y FE

Details of the premiere of *In the Heights* and interviews with the principals are the authors' firsthand accounts and from Dade Hayes, "*In the Heights* Moves the Masses at Tribeca Festival Premiere," Deadline, June 9, 2021. Josh Sapan, Lauren DeVillier, and Jason Kilar were interviewed by the authors.